

History of Wethersfield Library by Frances S. Shedd

One hundred and sixty-three years ago, in March 1783, a group of Wethersfield citizens met formally to establish the town's first library.

No doubt they felt this to be an important occasion for the leading men of the village as well as many of the lesser folk were present. Mr. Ezekiel Williams, Schoolmaster, representing perhaps the more literary element, Mr. Joseph Webb and 'Mr. John Chester, those keen-minded men of business, and Senator Stephen Mix Mitchell, also judge of the Superior Court, whose knowledge of the law might prove valuable in formulating the proper framework for this new venture.

There must have been much argument and weighty deliberation before a constitution, approved by everyone, was eventually drawn up; and since the town's best legal experience and business acumen had a large part in preparing this document it is not strange that the result was ponderous and rather terrifying.

As finally presented, the Union Society Library, as it was known, was to be a subscription library, its subscribers being shareholders in the corporation. An initial subscription of twenty shillings and annual dues of forty shillings entitled subscribers to library privileges, subject to the approval of the directors.

No mention is made of circumstances that, in the eyes of the governing board, might disqualify a townsman from becoming a member of the Library Society and we can only wonder as to whether their yardstick was moral, social or financial.

An applicant who was rejected by the directors might take an appeal to the membership at large.

Colonel John Breeme and Dr. Josiah Hart acted as a sort of informal Executive Committee and Mr. Ezekiel Williams was elected treasurer.

The Library was to be open to the fortunate ones for two hours every other Saturday afternoon.

With a sort of puritanical logic the length of time allowed for reading a selected book was dependent upon the size of the volume. Thus a large book might be kept for eight weeks while a smaller one must be returned in a month; and to further the definite use of each book still another directive was added. Taking into account the fact that some people were more rapid readers than others, it was provided that by obtaining an order from any three directors, a member might take out two folios or four duodecimos for a period of four weeks. Strict penalties were imposed for damages to books and all privileges were canceled until fines were paid.

To us of the present day whose motto is "more books for more people", the restrictions that hedged about the first Library seem almost prohibitive; but since the collection numbered only about 400 volumes no doubt stringent regulations were necessary to preserve as carefully as possible this all too scanty store of knowledge.

Mr. Sherman Adams tells us in Stiles "History of Wethersfield" that several copies of this early constitution and by-laws are still in existence but I have been unable to verify this statement. It is possible that a copy might be found among our own Historical Society papers, perhaps in those formerly belongings to Mr. Benjamin Adams.

This first Library, according to the records of the High Street School district, was housed in the upper room of its schoolhouse, which was, in those days, a white wooden building placed to the south and east of a later brick structure.

In 1811 it was moved to land belonging to the Otis Stillman heirs and to a spot near where the brick building now stands in which several of us here, I imagine, received our earliest schooling.

The gradual development of our libraries may well be used as a sort of measuring rod for the cultural changes that have taken place over our whole country.

Our first Library was made up almost entirely of religious and philosophical works with hardly a novel among them. Life was a serious business in those days and its horizons were limited. There were probably no books for children and the use of books by adults was so bound around with red tape as to make their study a difficult adventure.

Today even the most inconsiderable village library makes a brave attempt at having a diversified collection of books, including of course, the juvenile classics and sorts of devices are used to lure readers to their shelves where information may be had free for the asking.

No mention is made of the number of borrowers or the book of circulation of the early days but it is not surprising to find that interest in a Library of this type finally weakened so that in 1850 the Library closed its doors and its books were sold at auction.

For about fifteen years the town was without Library service but in 1866 a new impetus was given to the dormant interest in cultural life. Mr. Chauncey Rose of Terre Haute, a former resident of Wethersfield, offered to the Library Society the sum of \$3,000 provided the town would raise \$500 more.

With such an incentive a campaign for funds was started and donations of both money and books finally made available a library of about 1600 volumes. This was still a subscription library and membership dues were placed at two dollars for women and three dollars for men. The reason for this discrimination is, of course, open to conjecture but, being a woman, I prefer to think of it as a simple recognition of woman's neatness and respect for the property of others.

The Rose Library, as it was called, had its home, according to history, "in the second story of the building on the corner next south of the Congregational Church" and in 1872 it was moved to the upper room of the Congregational Chapel. It was during its occupancy of this room that the Library finally became free to the general public, as we know it today. In 1893, after much deliberation, this forward-looking move was decided upon and its first record reads as follows: "At a legally warned town meeting the town of Wethersfield did adopt the following by-laws, to be known as the Public Library by-laws:

(1) A public library is hereby established which shall, under proper regulations, be free to all the inhabitants of the town.

(2) The number of directors shall be nine.

(3) The amount to be annually expended by the town for the maintenance and increase of the Public Library shall be a sum not to exceed \$100.

It is difficult to imagine today how such a sum could in any way satisfy the reading needs of a town even as small as the Wethersfield of that day but I remember vividly the interest this new venture aroused.

There must have been a large enrollment of early borrowers for although I hoped to be among the first to register, examination shows my name to be well down on the list.

I have with me that early battered book thinking that some of you might care to look over the old names some of which I am sure will bring back memories long forgotten.

Only one book at a time might be withdrawn and the lending period was two weeks. By this time a fairly representative assortment of books had been accumulated including a very few of the more recent publications.

The first president of the Library Board was Rev. Mr. Teel and he was followed by Mr. Martin Griswold, Mr. J.O. Hurlburt, Mr. S.F. Willard, Mr. Wilfred W.Savage, Mr. E.O. Buck, Mr. Charles Calkins, Rev. T.C. Craig, Mr. Alec Stronach and Mr. Charles Even. Some of these, notably Mr. Willard, held this office many years.

In 1893, Mrs. John Belden was acting librarian and she held that position until 1895 when Miss Elizabeth Andrews was appointed to serve for six months at an annual salary of \$50. The next year this was raised to \$75 and the amount appropriated by the town for library purposes was placed at \$200.

As the Library slowly expanded, expenses, of course, also grew and in 1896 it was rather naively voted that "any amount unexpended at the close of the current year be used for the purchase of books".

During this year Mrs. George Roberts became librarian and she served in that capacity for sixteen years until her death. She was followed by Miss Caroline Robbins, Mrs. Raymond Vosberg and Miss Belle Brigham.

In those days the position of Library Director was no mere small political plum to be handed out at strategic intervals to worthy voters.

It was an office often carrying with it hard work and much genuine sacrifice of time. Librarians continued for many years to be underpaid and too much responsibility could not be asked of them. Therefore the directors stepped into the breach. They bought the books, often prepared them for circulation and even acted as substitutes when the librarian could not be present.

The final move of the Library in 1940 to the Welles School was a comparatively simple affair.

Sketch of Welles School (now Keeney Cultural Center) by Eleanor B. Wolf

One winter, dismayed at the sad condition of many of the books and knowing that money for rebinding was not available, two of the directors undertook to mend by hand all aging volumes. It was a monotonous task occupying all spare time for many months. One director finally fell by the way leaving a lone survivor to cope with what began to seem like a never-ending affair. I speak with feeling since I was that lone director.

No reference to this particular period would be complete without mention of the work of Miss Catherine Robbins. For many years she was the invisible power behind the librarian's desk and her services were many and varied. Miss Andrews also gave much help of the practical variety, often acting as substitute librarian.

A list of the directors who shaped the early fortunes of the Library includes many names held in happy memory by us all. In addition to those already mentioned were Mr. Frederick Griswold, Miss Mary Harris, Rev. George L. Clark and Mr. Philip Savage, to name only a few. Particular mention should be made of Mr. Leslie E. Adams who for thirty-four years served as treasurer of the Board and whose continuing interest in the Library was shown at his death by a bequest in his will for the purchase of books.

In 1922, I took over the work of librarian. Perhaps the story of these not too distant days does not rightfully belong in a historical sketch; but after all we of today are helping to shape the history of tomorrow and to fill out the record of a few facts may be of interest.

In those days there were probably some 5,000 volumes in workable condition on the shelves.

It is unfortunate that at that time no accurate accounts were kept of the number of books in use. We have registers containing lists of all our borrowers from 1892 to the present and records of all books-purchased during that time. A nostalgic note is injected into our present day enjoyment of reading as our eyes run down the earlier price lists and we realize that many worth-while book once to be bought for seventy-five cents cost us from two to three dollars.

Fortunately for us as working costs have advanced so has interest in good library service increased. The town has been waking up, gradually, as shown by increasing appropriations, to the value, even the necessity of a well-rounded public library.

We have many people from the city coming to live among us and they quite naturally expect some degree of good service. It is the aim of any worthwhile library to make that service as inclusive as possible and it is a problem that every librarian must meet -that of striking a right proportion between the so-called popular books, books of a short time appeal and those more enduring volumes, which should find a lasting place on the shelves.

It is interesting to note that our own library has expanded most widely in the fields of social science and pure science. Twenty-five years ago interest in social problems were confined very largely to those especially trained in that subject and scientific matter was something only for the really learned. Today with its increased emphasis placed in schools, clubs and among all thinking on these problems that we

are learning to realize effect each one of us, demand for material on such problems is increasing steadily. Crime, the Negro problem, immigration, taxation, population statistics and city planning are only a few of the subjects called for.

In the field of science more and more books are being produced for the ordinary reader. Their style and beautiful illustrations add to an easier understanding of what were once elusive subjects.

Referring to the old records, I find that in my first year of work, we bought 387 books. Today notwithstanding price increases we purchase each year over three times that number. Our list of magazines is also improved by addition and subtraction as the times demand and we have now over forty publications on our reading tables.

It was during those early 1920's that the change from the lower north room of the Academy Building to the upper floor was made. The delays and difficulties of that move are things best forgotten. The only pleasant memory of that hectic time is the thought of the willing help of a number of young High School students, many of them now parents of children old enough to be library patrons themselves. Without their aid the work of moving would have been much prolonged and late though it is, I record now publicly my gratitude for their friendly service.

Although of course in the intervening years our book stock had increased considerably no major problem was presented; it was simply a transferring of books already arranged in their old home to their new location in space carefully planned beforehand. The opening in those rooms was a gala occasion for everyone except the three librarians. It was after midnight before the last card was filed and the last book replaced on the shelves.

As was prophesied before the change was made those rooms are already overcrowded and the Library Board is making an intensive study looking toward the possibility and probability of a new library building. In addition to our overflowing shelves the combination of school, public offices and library has not been a happy one. During the daytime, the noise and confusion incident to school life and in the evening the frequent public meetings create a situation anything but ideal for good library work.

Without doubt the presence of the Library in its building has added to the problems of Welles School.

Altogether it would seem that the question of new library quarters is on the way to become one of the town's major issues.

In December of 1933 the Wethersfield Library received a visit from Santa Claus. A letter from Yale University informed us that the University, in conjunction with an unknown donor, was presenting us with a collection of books as a memorial to the late Edward D. Robbins, a former Wethersfield resident, a Yale graduate and for many years a well-known corporation lawyer.

Many of you remember Mr. Robbins during the years he lived in Wethersfield and conducted his law practice in Hartford. My own recollections of him go back to my very youthful days and the awe I felt for his superior age and attainments. But through that awe I felt even then his very genuine interest in young people and their education for living.

His affection for the Library was well known and it seemed most fitting that after his death that feeling should take tangible form.

This first gift was made up of over 150 books and its value must have been close to \$1,000.

The books were largely philosophical and historical with some travel and biography; and since the Yale imprint stands for a fine quality we have on our shelves many books found ordinarily only in large and very complete libraries.

Almost every year since that first date we have received a supplementary gift, not as large to be sure but of equally fine type and equally welcome. Some of the books have been too erudite for our present needs and they have been laid away until more space and a more scholarly approach makes them of value.

For many years the name of the secret donor remained a mystery but it was finally discovered that it was Mrs. Robbins who was taking that way to keep alive her husband's memory in the hearts of his early friends.

The Library has received other gifts not so large nor so valuable but timely and most gratefully accepted. The pioneer in this field was the Women's Saturday Afternoon Club that about ten years ago established a book fund in memory of its first president, Mrs. George L. Clark.

With this fund we were able to buy for the first few years only one book but by last year the amount had increased so that we added three very worthwhile volumes to our collection.

In 1944 the Rotary Club voted a sum of \$50 to be expended on books dealing with various phases of South American life.

For the last two years the Wolcott Hill Community Association has sent us an annual check for \$25 to be spent as we saw fit. It is to be noted that these gifts were form of money, leaving the Library free to make its own selections.

We welcome these gifts not only for the very real additions they bring to our shelves but also for the evidence they give of the growing interest of the town in library affairs.

It may not be generally known that the Connecticut Public Library Committee lays aside annually for each library in the state the sum of \$100 for the purchase of books. Each library makes out its own list of books, which is sent to the committee for approval. For a number of years this sum was all that our Library had to depend on for its book supply. The making out of each list was a serious and weighty matter involving much study of publishers, booklets and visits to neighboring libraries.

We still depend on it for many books that we consider luxuries and beyond our ordinary budget.

Several of our townspeople have been thoughtful in offering us the overflow from their own personal libraries but in every case we have been free to make our own selections and more than once these choices have proved to be the very books needed to fill a long-standing want. Through such public support, let us hope that our own Library may continue to grow and to be a source of pride to the town and even to the state.

This is a paper written by Miss Frances S. Shedd and read at the meeting of the Wethersfield Historical Society on November 4, 1946. Miss Shedd, who resigned as librarian in May 1946, after almost twenty-five years of service, has devotedly guided the library through the period of its greatest growth and development.